

STOREFRONT: Iconoclasm, Invention and the Ideal

by Lebbeus Woods

"Round up the usual suspects."

Kyong Park

Founder of Storefront

From the beginning, Storefront has been a quietly, even unintentionally subversive organization. It has existed without the endorsement or financial support of the very wealthy and clanish New York art and architectural establishment, preferring the independence of living from small State and private grants, donations from artists and friends, and--more than once--from its founder's modest income. Freed from the sort of entanglements that doomed the IAUS, Storefront is no less a public, multifaceted organization. It has developed an open and free-spirited programme that, though often ignored by the establishment press, has attracted international interest for its originality and audacity. Exhibitions of the work of independent New York architects such as myself, Dan Coma and Neil Denari, of such overlooked foreign architects as Imre Makowicz and the Arizonian Bart Prince would have found few if any venues in Manhattan, because these individualists work with disregard for the local elite and their preferences. Storefront and its supporters have been the subjects of what Peter Cook has called a "studied ignoring" by the powers-that-be and has acquired the sort of "unperson" status that gives Storefront an extremely important role to play in the New York architectural and art scene: the Underground venue of somewhat unruly and iconoclastic avant-garde.

Storefront has never been expected to survive for very long. Yet in the four years since it was founded, it has produced a series of exhibitions, published posters and catalogues, served as a meeting place for discussions, and compiled a unique slide library of the drawings, models and buildings of many talented but largely unpublished architects that serves as a public resource center. Its schedule of exhibitions for this Fall and the coming Spring shows that Storefront is not merely surviving, but growing stronger.

The name is a vestige of the days when Kyong Park and Glenn Weiss ran their operation in a tiny shop with a large show window, a few blocks north on Prince Street. Weiss has since gone to Seattle, where he started a new architecture gallery. Park has settled into a new space at 97 Kenmare Street with determination, setting up a long work table that has quickly been overwhelmed with paperwork, making telephone calls to friends and colleagues to talk about the future of

Storefront. He wants to tap their ideas, enlist their help, absorb their diverse energies into his own.

This is as it should be. Storefront has always been very much about collaborative energy. The name itself recalls the socially-conscious Sixties, People Power and New Left politics. For a time, during the Park-Weiss period, Storefront seemed to to be assuming a social-activist role with exhibitions like "Homeless at Home," but this is not what Park means today when he talks about a "collective spirit." He has in mind a new kind of interchange between artists and architects who share some basic convictions but have different ways of working. Through exhibitions and special projects, this collaboration could demonstrate just what a new and creative urban community might be able to accomplish if it takes the initiative and creates its own opportunities. Park seems to have put aside pre-conceived ideas of what the collaboration might be, in favor of open discussion, reflection and spontaneous action. Part of the fun of it, and the seriousness, too, is in letting the collaboration happen naturally and without his interfering too much with the creative play between individuals.

In view of this collaborative spirit, it seems at first ironic that Storefront's best efforts in the past have been its exhibitions of architects whose work is individualistic and experimental, as yet unsanctioned by proven social usefulness or a wide acceptance, but is justified by the authority of its intrinsic confidence and intensity. But this irony is only superficial. If a new collaboration in the arts is ever to come about, it will begin with individuals strong enough, independent enough to develop their own ideas and ways of working. Creative autonomy may well be the most socially redeeming virtue of any work advancing public arts today so weighted down by commercial interests and academic timidity.

Through intense conversation and meetings, Park believes he and the rest of us will see an outline of the forms a new collaboration will take. No formula, no ideology can accomplish this for us. The forms will become clear in the process of planning and making exhibitions and special projects. Among the latter may be straightforward projects initiated by Storefront and developed by a team of architects and artists, symposia addressing important issues or problems in the arts or the city, the actual construction of places within the city, or more unconventional projects concerned with ideas that are only now beginning to take form. Park wisely remains indefinite about Storefront's goals, even as its current schedule of activities is beginning. His remarks are often labyrinthine and cryptic. But there is no doubt that he is subtly guiding the development

of Storefront through the individuals he invites to participate with him in the ongoing exchange of ideas.

Regardless of particulars, it is certain that Storefront will remain a meeting place for talented architects and artists whose iconoclastic views condemn them to an existential freedom. Storefront is committed to free individuals and to their unique ways of thinking, seeing and working. Storefront will continue to value originality and inventiveness as the hallmarks of individual vision, and as the essential contribution of the individual to the most productive collaborations. The self-realizing individual is the pre-requisite for a strong and healthy community.

In the past, Storefront has not been a gallery seeking commercial success, but a place and a group of individuals brought together and sustained by a common spirit. This spirit can be generalized as an irrevocable impulse to articulate through works of art and architecture some unspoken and elusive ideal that embraces a broad range of thoughts and activities. Our work has the same paradoxical relationship to the world that individual being has to the human community as a whole: it is both autonomous and interdependent. This is a paradox resolved only in work striving towards a realization of universal ideals.

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